

Nothing But Flowers

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§1 Prologue

It was a miracle when the final breakthrough happened. The small band which had moved together for generations across the barren wasteland had suddenly learned to symbolize things into a system of signs with which they could communicate.

Almost immediately they were stoned to death by the Wise Ones for attempting to bring about Civilization once more and undo the Revolution.

§2 Introduction

There was a factory
Now there are mountains and rivers
You got it, you got it

(Nothing But) Flowers
TALKING HEADS

The modern primitivist movement has many names: “deep ecology” (though this specifically refers to a strand within it), “neo-primitivism” (at least, in the early days), “green anarchism” (though this is a broader term: it also includes many critics of primitivism, such as Murray Bookchin and his social ecology), “anarcho-primitivism”, and “anti-civilization” (shortened sometimes to “anti-civ”) among them.

This polemic is not intended to silence all criticisms of particular technologies, as doubtless it will be charged. Indeed, there are some with which the Revolution must dispose of: the personal automobile, for instance, which would in most uses be replaced with an extensive train system—or drones, which would be done away with entirely; in this regard, we have common ground with Bordiga and with the early Camatte. The objection here is that a “return to nature” and “direct social relations” is not only possible but also necessary and/or preferable to any alternative. In addition, despite primitivism’s fetishization of indigenous peoples through the “noble savage” stereotype (imposed upon the population as a norm), its brief focus on protecting indigenous lifeways in the 1990s is admirable.

Why undertake a critique of the primitivists? Many would doubt that they deserve attention, yet while anti-capitalist ideas are struggling amongst each other for hegemony on the Left and are far indeed from gaining any sort of hegemony over society as a whole, they have the potential to do real damage to any serious anti-capitalist movement, both

through association and through the spread of their line among supposedly anti-capitalist organizations. Primitivism gains popularity, in the current moment, in reaction to the overreach of Silicon Valley and to the continuing inaction in response to climate change, much like previous millenarian beliefs. In order to expose and defeat primitivism, we must be able to address these issues in full depth. We must also search for different emancipatory models: one that immediately stands out is of course (Haraway 1985): to this we may add solarpunk and Afrofuturism, as well as more recent theory such as (Cuboniks 2015) and (Wark 2017); while “fully-automated luxury communism” may indeed be as much fantasy as primitivism, it is closer to a model for communism than primitivism can ever be.

§3 A History of Primitivism

§3.1 Similar Theories

Primitivism has many precursors which, due to their being unfashionable in the Left, are frequently (but not always) left unmentioned, or indeed ignored, including Rousseau, Malthus, and Heidegger.

An early precursor of modern primitivism would be the Abecedarians, a minor Anabaptist sect in 16th century Germany which opposed all human knowledge, charging that it would interfere with revelation, which would be all that was necessary; their name emerged from a rejection of the alphabet. For obvious reasons (the necessity of the obliteration of human knowledge), there is a deep kinship between the Abecedarians and contemporary primitivists. Of course, the standard rejoinder would be that the “Abecedarians” were just a caricature of Anabaptists, who were part of Thomas Müntzer’s Peasant War; yet Nikolaus Storch and Andreas Bodenstein both shied away from the Peasant’s War in 1525 (Bodenstein was sheltered by Luther) and both were considered leaders of the Abecedarians. In addition, primitivists share many characteristics with millenarian sects of Christianity, such as chiliasm, or, more recently, dispensationalism.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in the 18th century, posited a “state of nature” as an ideal and a guide—contra Hobbes, who claimed that life in the state of nature was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”, Rousseau posited the idea of the “noble savage” (though he never used the term, which actually dates to John Dryden), a “simple”, “in touch with nature”, and “uncorrupted” human and an ideal “between animals and civilization”; Rousseau looked to the indigenous peoples of the Caribbeans as examples. For Rousseau, the further civilization developed, the worse off people were. This dehumanizing myth is foundational for primitivism; indeed, Fredy Perlman cites Rousseau as an antecedent in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*.

It is a shame that Thomas Robert Malthus is not remembered for his economic theories, whose concerns can be seen as proto-Keynesian and which influenced Marx in spite of himself. Malthus is better remembered for his theory of population, which is also the element of his work which influenced the primitivists: he argued that population grows geometrically while food supplies grow linearly, so any gain in food production—or indeed in better living conditions for the poor—would immediately be eliminated by the subsequent growth in population. For those who followed Malthus, the solution was population control and eugenics—and eventually genocide—for his theory of population was always applied to the poorest, who had the highest birthrates and the least power to determine policy. Deep ecology relies on Malthusian theories of population explicitly; other

primitivist models, which call for a return to modes of production that cannot supply the current population with food, implicitly rely on Malthusian theories of population.

Martin Heidegger, a provincial country bumpkin from Meßkirch, was both a Nazi and one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century (his project is a reactionary, obscurantist variant of phenomenology); his work after the turn (*die Kehre*) (which occurred in the 1930s or 1940s) reflects a shift in focus towards discussion of technology. Heidegger, whose theory owes much to Ernst Jünger, contrasts technology with poetry (especially that of Hölderlin), the latter (who “is on the track to the holy”) being superior to the former (simply order-taking): if philosophy is a clearing in the forest one ventures towards, technology is the construction of a building based on blueprints; it obliterates nature. Heidegger advocates for a “home-turn” away from technology to mysticism and tribalism. Science is “a darkening of the world”. Heidegger, along with Marcuse and Ellul, would be deeply influential on the hippie subculture, which itself influenced the American branch of the primitivists. This by itself is not the basis by which one can note the similarities between Nazism and primitivism (instead of focusing merely on drawing lines of influence, which are relevant but not *enough*—after all, Derrida, too, was influenced by Heidegger—one must analyse their ideas and practice) the similarity in political project is striking.

Other important antecedents include Thoreau and the transcendentalists, as well as the anarchist naturists, including Tolstoy and many other Christian anarchists. Closer to the emergence of contemporary primitivism but still before 1968, we may also mention the influence of Jacques Ellul and Marshall Sahlins. Jacques Ellul, a Christian anarchist, wrote *The Technological Society* in 1954, claiming that technology requires efficiency and enslaves both humans and nature to it. In 1966, Marshall Sahlins gave the “Man the Hunter” talk, positing the (by-now outdated, yet at the time a break from the orthodox theory which held that hunter-gatherers as a whole constantly had to strive to avoid starvation) “original affluent society” theory holding that hunter-gatherer societies, as a whole, lived in plenty with ample leisure—a theory which has proved to be central to primitivism. Ivan Illich’s distinction between tools (which remain at the disposal of their users) and technology (which control their users) would prove to be foundational for many criticisms of technology.

§3.2 History of the Current Primitivist Movement

Primitivism in its current form begins in the wake of the failure of May 1968. The immediate origin was in the humanistic left-communism of the Situationist International with its focus on alienation (as well as the notion of “direct social relations” under communism), as well as in the works of Jacques Camatte in the 1970s (one might also note the hippie subculture). Camatte was earlier an orthodox Bordigist, who had split from the International Communist Party in 1966 due to its so-called “activist” turn, publishing the journal *Invariance*. In the wake of May 1968’s failure, however, he concluded that capital had “domesticated” the human race, leaving no possibility for communist revolution and leading instead to a conflict between humanity and capital, which he claimed would take the form of “leaving this world” (indeed, “Against Domestication” calls for people to move to the countryside to protect children from domestication by capital), developing Bordiga’s oft-neglected ecological writings, which focused on the contradiction between town and country, concluding that cities were inherently unstable and parasitic on the countryside as

narrated in (Varn 2016). For Bordiga, the solution was not primitivism, because “one can’t go back to earlier points in history without a species-wide lobotomy: the amassed wealth, capital, and knowledge exists in the material world at that point”: particular technologies (and specifically “the telos in technology”) should be seen within its context and purpose, and some uses will have to be abolished while others can be repurposed. His vision of “collapsing the distinction between urban and rural life” was to bring the efficiency of the city to the countryside. Camatte, too, (Varn 2016) notes, did not, at least in the 1970s, subscribe to the talk of “direct social relations”.

In 1973, Arne Næss coined “deep ecology”, which he claimed was inherent in the idea of ecology itself, to be contrasted with all other positions, termed “shallow environmentalism”, characterized by Næss as “anthropocentric” and consumerist. Deep ecology holds that non-human life (as well as its richness and diversity) is an end-in-itself which should not be freely exploited by humans except to satisfy “vital” human needs; a substantial drop in the human population is not incompatible (in the view of the deep ecologists) with the flourishing of humanity and is necessary for the flourishing of non-human life (and thus is a central plank in deep ecology); humans are currently excessively and increasingly damaging the non-human world, which must be remedied through a massive transformation of society (including a great effort to preserve wildlife), to replace “standard of living” with “life quality”, the latter being associated with “simple living”. Implicit is an acceptance of the Gaia hypothesis—that of the Earth as a self-regulating homeostatic organism—and of Malthusian ideas of population, explained in the above section. The influence of deep ecology upon the animal rights movement has led to some cross-fertilization between the primitivist movement and the animal rights movement (such as the influence of the Animal Liberation Front on the Earth Liberation Front), however, the two are distinct movements.

In 1965, Harvey Ovshinsky started *Fifth Estate*, a Detroit-based publication that was originally a fairly general magazine in the underground press of the New Left. It was only in 1975—after the beginning of the Long Downturn, during the ebb of the New Left—that *Fifth Estate* began to identify itself as explicitly “anti-authoritarian”, as it had been commandeered by a group known as the “Eat the Rich Gang” (Ovshinsky had departed from *Fifth Estate* in 1969), influenced by Fredy Perlman (a leading primitivist), Jacques Camatte, Jean Baudrillard (a celebrity academic), and the Situationists; Perlman himself would later write for *Fifth Estate*, which would from then on be close to *Black and Red Press* and primitivist in outlook.

Baudrillard can be considered, as Debord did, the chief recuperator of the Situationists and the darling of liberal post-structuralist academia. He emphasized consumption over production and argued for the existence of “symbolic value” (value of an object as a symbol of a relationship between the subject who assigns it and another subject) and “sign-value” (value “in a system of objects”: prestige, for instance) in addition to use-value and exchange-value; he argued for a move away from political economy and production—by 1981, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard would break down the sign into four stages (faithful copy, unfaithful copy, copy-without-an-original, pure simulacrum without relation to reality), would identify three orders of simulacra (pre-modern, where representation is limited and obviously artificial; modern, associated with the Industrial Revolution, where mass reproduction breaks the distinction between original and copy and thus between representation and reality; post-modern, where originality entirely vanishes in favor

of a simulacrum, such that all is simulation), and argue that in the contemporary era, symbols and signs have replaced reality making human experience a mere simulation, rooting this in mass media, markets, distributed production, urbanization, and language. The latter two would be especially salient for primitivists.

Fredy Perlman was a left-communist turned anarchist inspired by the Situationists (earlier known for his 1966 translation with Miloš Samardžija of Isaak Illyich Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*) who in 1969 founded *Black and Red* magazine and from 1971 to 1976 wrote and translated several books, including those by Jacques Camatte. In 1983 he wrote *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, a founding text of primitivism, and in 1984 *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, an idealist polemic against anti-imperialist movements which, at its core, is nothing but the liberal-chauvinist both-sides-ism, presenting the cautions that anti-imperialists have always held as mortal blows and original points that they never were. He died in 1985. Perlman's view is summarized in ("Civilization and its latest discontents" 1995) as thus:

Perlman's book begins by distinguishing between a state of nature (harmony between humanity and the rest of nature) and civilization. Civilization began, not because everyone wanted to improve their conditions of existence, not because of 'material conditions', but because a small group of people imposed it on everyone else. Perlman traces the origin of civilization to the Sumerians, who, he says, felt obliged to build waterworks to ensure a regular supply of water. The Sumerians invested power to direct the building of the waterworks in one individual, who eventually became a powerful expert elite and then a warrior elite - the first ruling class, in effect. Under the direction of their ruling class, the Sumerians then waged war on their neighbours, eventually enslaving them. The rest of Perlman's book is taken up with the rest of world history, comprising the evolution of - and resistance to - various types of Leviathan (the name, taken from Hobbes, which Perlman uses for civilization, class society or the state), each of which takes in human beings as its living energy, is animated by them, and excretes them out as it decays, only to be replaced by yet another Leviathan. Leviathans fight with each other, but the winner is always Leviathan. Given that the opposition is between Leviathan and the oppressed majority, the differences between types of class society can therefore be largely glossed over.

Perlman appears to agree with Marx that what distinguishes civilization from primitive communism is the development of the means of production, which enabled surplus labour and thus the existence of a parasitic non-productive class. But the book challenges the traditional Marxist view by suggesting that in primitive communism there were already 'surpluses'. If there was no problem with means of subsistence, then there could be no need to develop the means of production. The emergence of civilization is therefore comparable with the 'fall' from the Garden of Eden.

As the 1980s progressed, *Fifth Estate* would become the center of primitivism, publishing not only Fredy Perlman's anti-civilization diatribe, but also David Watson's *Against the Megamachine* in 1981 and John Zerzan's work. We must thus understand David Watson's primitivism and John Zerzan's.

David Watson is a primitivist; he repudiated the more extreme beliefs traditionally associated with primitivists such as John Zerzan (and espoused earlier by Watson himself in *Against the Megamachine* and many other essays for *Fifth Estate*) in 1997 with (Watson 1997) but maintained a more moderate “reasoned primitivism” which sought to promote indigenous autonomy and learn from the lifeways of indigenous people without imitating them normatively.

John Zerzan began in the 1960s New Left counterculture in Haight-Ashbury, working for the San Francisco welfare department and organizing for SSEU, the social worker’s union; for this he was denounced by the group Contradiction as a “leftist bureaucrat” or “anti-bureaucrat”. From the 1970s onwards he became associated with *Black and Red Press*, *Fifth Estate*, *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* et cetera. As (“Civilization and its latest discontents” 1995) notes:

In the case of Zerzan, his early work romanticizes proletarian spontaneity; on the basis of his observations of apparently new expressions of resistance in the form of worker sabotage and absenteeism, he pronounced this to be the future of class struggle. In the early 1980s, the recession threw millions out of work. We might take this as the vindication of his critics’ predictions about the transience of these forms of the revolt against work as viable expressions of the class struggle; for in the face of widespread unemployment how could workers commit sabotage or go absent? But instead of recognizing the setbacks to the struggle as a whole, Zerzan saw in the new unemployment figures the ‘collapse’ of capitalism and the ‘vitality’ of the revolt against work. For those who were still in jobs, work intensity increased during this period. To Zerzan, however, the most important thing, was a decline of the work-ethic. Zerzan also dismissed strikes (successful or otherwise) as being cathartic charades. His focus on attitudes allowed the perilous state of the proletariat as a movement to be overlooked.

Drawing on Adornian critical theory and Baudrillard, as well as Ivan Illich’s tool-technology distinction and the “original affluent society” thesis of Marshall Sahlins, Zerzan wrote the “origins essays” in the late 80s, claiming that civilization is entirely alienation, emerging from counting, time, language, gender inequality, work, technology, art, agriculture, and ritual, all of which inexorably emerge from symbolization, which is for him a tool of domination and alienation. For Zerzan, the ideal society is pure hunter-gatherer lacking domesticated animals—but also lacking language, time, number, art, ritual, work et cetera. His programme is titled “Future Primitive”; it calls for “rewilding” and decentralization.

In 1979, David Foreman, Mike Roselle, Howie Wolke, and Bart Koehler founded Earth First!. Until 1986, Earth First! largely focused on publicity stunts and radical environmentalist proposals. In 1985, attempts at protesting logging by Willamette Industries through civil disobedience slowed down logging, but ultimately failed; in 1987, Earth First! moved towards direct action and became influenced by deep ecology, attracting members from the activist subculture, especially anarchists. Soon, Earth First! began calling for eugenics and resorted to Malthusian theories of population (as (*Deep Ecology Critique* n.d.), (Bookchin 1987a), (Bookchin 1987b), and (Bookchin 1988) note): Christopher Manes (writing as “Miss Ann Thropy”) said that AIDS was a good thing (and if it didn’t exist, environmentalists should make a different plague) as it was Gaia’s solution for

overpopulation; David Foreman suggested that the Ethiopian famine should be celebrated as it culled the human population. Reed Noss wrote of a genetic “deep ecology elite” as a “chosen people”. Bill Devall suggested that a reduction in the birthrate must begin in the Third World; as babies in the First World use far more resources on average, this reveals a eugenicist, racist core. One might also note the Finnish deep ecologist, Pentti Linkola, who demands massive depopulation (through eugenics, genocide, and abortion; he said that the genocides of the 20th centuries were “massive depopulation operations” but clearly not enough). In the 1990s, many primitivists attempted to dis-associate themselves from deep ecology due to these embarrassing statements (as noted in (Watson 1997)), yet to escape its stench is not as easy as disavowal—as white nationalists have shown, it’s easy to transparently disavow a desire by merely saying “I do not advocate for it, but it *will* happen, we must prepare for it and look for examples”. *Green Anarchist* for instance celebrated fascist violence, such as the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.

In 1991, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) was founded by Les U. Knight in Portland, Oregon, based on deep ecology and utilitarianism (especially as formulated by Peter Singer), saying that people should choose to not reproduce so as to lower the human population, preferably to zero. VHEMT, however, rejects the more extreme rhetoric of other deep ecology organizations by emphasizing voluntarism.

In 1992, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) split from Earth First! due to EF!’s supposed non-violence; ELF was modelled after the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), another deep ecology group inside the animal rights movement which used a leaderless resistance model to wage ecotage and guerrilla warfare. In 1995, the Earth Liberation Army (ELA), a similar organization, was formed. In 2011, Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith, and Aric McBay founded the deep ecology/radical feminist group Deep Green Resistance (DGR), which adopts a trans woman-extremist radical feminist (TWERF) stance to gender, almost identical to the “bourgeois decadence” line; it has been criticized by other primitivists for a “cult of personality” around Jensen, and like other deep ecology organizations it has an elitist *Herrenvolk* view of itself.

John Moore was perhaps the leading British primitivist; he helped begin the fusion of primitivism with post-left anarchism (the contemporary followers of Saint Max, such as Bob “snitch” Black or Hakim “pædophile” Bey (aka Peter Lamborn Wilson) whose ideas have been decisively refuted in (Marx and Engels 1846), (Freeman 1970) and (Bookchin 1995), though they maintain that no one who opposes them has read their thought, which is quite false), writing *A Primitivist Primer*. Despite having a generally post-modernist outlook (which includes the belief that “there is no outside to power”), Moore advocated the “abolition of power”, as opposed to others who might ask for its dispersal. For him, then, primitivism simply sidelines all other leftist movements because it abolishes mediations (technology, to him, is equivalent to mediation). He died in 2002.

We must now move to Ted “Unabomber” Kaczynski. Kaczynski was a prodigy in mathematics, becoming an assistant professor at UC Berkeley in 1967 at the age of 25. He had earlier been a subject of a bizarre psychological experiment at Harvard which dehumanized and brutalized its subjects weekly based on personal essays written by them explaining their beliefs and aspirations; the reactions were monitored. In 1969, he resigned from his position and moved to a cabin in rural Montana, living a simple, survivalist life. In 1975, he decided it was impossible to live in isolation in response to development and industry near his cabin. He read the works of Jacques Ellul and began to sabotage nearby

development. From 1978 to 1995, Kaczynski bombed universities, airplanes and airplane companies, computer store owners, an advertising executive, and a timber lobbyist a total of 16 times, killing 3 people and injuring 23 people. In 1995, he sent letters to newspapers demanding publication of *Industrial Society and its Future*, his manifesto, saying that if it were done he would “desist from terrorism”. *Industrial Society and its Future* argued that the industrial revolution had caused deep alienation and the replacement of authentic needs and desires as well as traditional values with “surrogate activities”. He claimed that this would eventually lead to genetic engineering to make humans fit society, but that all this can be stopped through a return to nature. He vehemently opposed leftism, claiming that it was driven by “inferiority” and “oversocialization” and refused any collaboration with leftists; but criticized conservatives for not going far enough to oppose the Industrial Revolution. The FBI arrested Kaczynski in 1996; he has since been imprisoned in a super-max prison in Florence, Colorado. John Zerzan formed a friendship with Kaczynski and consistently defended him; the post-left collective CrimethInc. deified him, calling him “a hero for our times”. Eventually, in 2008, Kaczynski criticized primitivism for projecting progressive values (for Kaczynski, the values of industrial society) upon ‘primitive society’, arguing for a return to traditional values and survivalism instead; since then, Zerzan at least has been estranged from him. In 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, who bombed and massacred 77 people in Norway in pursuit of a neo-Nazi belief system, plagiarized *Industrial Society and its Future* (replacing “leftists” with “multiculturalists” and “cultural Marxists”—a nod to the neo-Nazi updating of the Nazi “Judeo-Bolshevik” conspiracy theory) in his manifesto 2083. Paul Kingsnorth, who founded the primitivist “Dark Mountain Project” in 2015, found *Industrial Society and its Future* “worryingly convincing”.

In 2011, Adam Lanza called in to John Zerzan’s radio show, asking about Travis, a domesticated chimpanzee who attacked a person; Lanza said that the chimp attacked to free itself from domestication, and drew a parallel to a teenager shooting up a mall. Zerzan agreed; in 2012, Lanza would become the perpetrator of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, killing 20 children. Zerzan maintained that Lanza had a point, despite condemning his actions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, primitivism increasingly began to influence green anarchism as a whole; the eponymous magazine became primitivist in the mid-1990s. The influence has waned somewhat, but remains; the anonymous publishing of *Desert* in 2015 (an edgy, nihilist introduction to primitivism in much the same vein as *The Coming Insurrection* was an edgy introduction to the ultra-left) has gained much attention—especially as inaction on environmental preservation continues (even on the Left) and Silicon Valley continues to over-reach, this tendency grows. In the 1990s, primitivism merged with the straight edge hardcore punk scene, as well as post-left anarchy (latter day worshippers of Saint Max; this fusion is especially associated with the CrimethInc. collective; one might distinguish a primmie from a postie by whether they are a yuppie fetishizing indigenous people or a yuppie fetishizing hobos; yes, the author of this piece is a yuppie too, but she doesn’t pretend otherwise); one of the results was hardline straight-edge hardcore punk, a movement which was primitivist, in favor of animal liberation, pacifism, opposition to abortion, LGBT people, smoking, extramarital sex, masturbation, caffeine, sugar, and modern medicine. These various movements were labelled *lifestyle anarchism* and criticised in (Bookchin 1995). In 1999, primitivists from Eugene and Olympia made up a significant number of the black bloc in the anti-globalization WTO protests in Seattle; they

thus received increased mainstream attention; the anti-globalization movement, however, as well as the momentum the primitivists had gained, soon fizzled out, as movementist formations tend to do.

§4 On Juggernaut

From *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* in the 14th century to the modern day, the Anglo-phone world is haunted by Juggernaut. Juggernaut can be seen as analogous to Leviathan: a massive, irresistible force, ruthlessly destructive.

Juggernaut came from British myths about the *ratha yata* (chariot procession) at Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha; the name derives from Sanskrit Jagannātha (lit. 'world-lord'), an aspect of Kṛṣṇa, a statue of which would be placed on the chariot. According to the myth, believers in devotion would jump in front of the chariot to be crushed under its wheels; this was, for the Britons, the ultimate horror of Hinduism, a result of idolatry.

Of course, the myth has no factual basis, and Hinduism's role in oppression isn't because of "idolatry", but because it is the superstructural aspect of caste, the method by which the *savarna* groups (with the Brahmins at their head) would oppress the *avarna* groups.

§5 Critique

Don't leave me stranded here
I can't get used to this lifestyle

(*Nothing But*) *Flowers*
TALKING HEADS

§5.1 "Against History" Is An Apt Title

§5.1.1 Philosophical Vulgarity

One deeply important element in primitivism is the, as explained in (Toscano 2011) (a critique of communization),

entirely untenable notion that communism involves 'direct social relations'. As authors from Fourier to Harvey have suggested, it makes much more sense to conceive a non-capitalist future as one that will involve infinitely more varied and more complex forms of social mediation, forms for which the refunctioning of many (though definitely not all) of the devices which permit the reproduction of capital will be necessary. If the world we inhabit is one that has been thoroughly shaped by the history of capital (and of class struggle), it stands to reason that simple negation – with its tendency to facile fantasies of communism rising like a phoenix from the ashes of anomie and the thorough collapse of social reproduction – is no proposal at all. In a world where no object or relation is untouched by capital, the logistical, strategic and political question is in many ways what will require abolishing, and what converting, or, in a more dialectical vein, what is to be negated without remainder and what sublated.

Similar to this is the idealist notion of “power” in the abstract, something inherited from the post-structuralists and never explained; it is merely condemned, and the only correct project relating to power according to primitivists is its abolition. Again, post-structuralist philosophers such as Foucault would find this notion philistine: there is no “outside” to power for Foucault. And this narrow-mindedness has political consequences: as, according to primitivists, most movements of the oppressed aim to seize power, they are condemned and their lessons ignored.

In addition, as (Ahmad 1995) reminds us, it is not enough to show the *origins* of something to establish that it *remains* this way. Guns were invented under class society; this does not mean that we must immediately dispose of guns; instead, our position on guns must begin by asking whose class interest they (not necessarily as a whole) serve in this particular moment.

By reversing the relationship between social forces and technology, so that in primitivist thought Leviathan emerges from chance (though a material condition is cited, as shall soon be shown, its nature as a material condition is denied) and drives history instead of material, social forces, we may charge primitivism as a whole with idealism and mystification.

It's also important to note that Perlman *himself* criticized the use of “alienation” in his introduction to (Rubin 1928), which does the same: both show how in Marx, the earlier Hegelian theory of alienation is superseded by the theory of fetishism. That Perlman's entire project in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* centres on the Hegelian/young-Marxist theory of alienation represents a severe retrogression in Perlman's theory.

§5.1.2 Distortion of History

As (“Civilization and its latest discontents” 1995) notes, examined closely, Perlman's argument collapses by itself:

However, Perlman's claim that the ancient Sumerians felt obliged to introduce technological innovation suggests that primitive communism wasn't always so idyllic after all: the place where they were living was 'hellish'; they were intent on 'farming a jungle'; in the rainy season the floods carried off both their crops and their houses, while in the dry season their plants dried up and died. This might suggest that population growth forced people to live in marginal lands, away from any surpluses. It also seems to conflict with Perlman's repeated claim that material conditions were not responsible for the development of technology and thus civilization; if lack of a regular water supply isn't a material condition, then what is? Similarly, the material condition of a growing population isn't discussed. The social relations Perlman describes which accompany the new technology seem to be rather arbitrary. Much (the whole of history, in fact) seems to hinge on the decision made by the 'wise' (sic) Sumerian elders to appoint 'a strong young man' to be the 'supervisor' of the waterworks project. (So is chance to blame rather than the small minority?)

The historical record in itself also contradicts the primitivist account. As (Bookchin 1995, pp. 44-6) notes, the “Man the Hunter” thesis is now largely discredited: the San people of the Kalahari desert that the original thesis relied on were originally herders, farmers,

traders, and iron-workers, only reverting to hunting and gathering in the 19th century due to “the collapse of mercantile capital” and the social policies of European colonizers; the Yuquí people in the Amazon, who did not use stone, boats, domestic animals, or fire, had a class society with a small elite and a caste of slaves, inherited from an earlier, slave-holding horticulturalist society—clearly the collapse of “civilization” didn’t lead to the collapse of class society. Furthermore, the Indus Valley Civilization of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa was urban and had a sophisticated sewer system, yet whether or not they had a hierarchical social structure is disputed; there is little evidence to assert that they did, and indeed the way in which the infrastructure was constructed (with equal access to water) implies a relatively egalitarian structure.

§5.1.3 The “Noble Savage”

The “noble savage”, a term erroneously attributed to Rousseau (yet which describes his view of the “state of nature” fairly well), is the Orientalist, Romanticized view of indigenous peoples as simple, innately good (“uncorrupted by civilization”), and “in touch with nature”. Perlman approvingly cited Rousseau, and this attitude is an essential element in Zerzan’s attempt to demonstrate that society would not only be possible without so-and-so concept but would be better without it.

This view is both false and dehumanizing. It is no surprise that the myth of indigenous peoples being “simple”, “primitive”, and “natural” emerges with the rise of colonialism: it allows the colonizer to ignore the desires of indigenous peoples as they express it, instead projecting the colonizer’s desire for a “simple life”. As (Keeley 1996) notes, so-called “primitive” societies were not necessarily peaceful utopias: for example, over 40% of male deaths of the Yanomamö people (who live in Venezuela and Brazil) are attributable to war. And indeed, (Bookchin 1995, pp. 43-44) reminds us that “we will never have anyway of knowing whether the lifeways of today’s foraging cultures accurately mirror those of our ancestral past. Not only did modern aboriginal cultures develop over thousands of years, but they were significantly altered by the diffusion of countless traits from other cultures before they were studied by Western researchers.”, noting

Scores of “primal” peoples, like the forests they inhabited, were no more “virginal” at European contact than were the Lakota Indians at the time of the American Civil War, *Dancing With Wolves* to the contrary notwithstanding. Many of the much-touted “primal” belief-systems of existing aborigines are clearly traceable to Christian influences. Black Elk, for example, was a zealous Catholic, while the late-nineteenth-century Ghost Dance of the Paiute and Lakota was profoundly influenced by Christian evangelical millennialism.

§5.1.4 The Gaia Hypothesis and the Overpopulation Hypothesis

Primitivism generally takes as a central but unspoken assumption the *Gaia hypothesis*: the belief that the Earth is a self-regulating, homeostatic organism. Humans are thus seen as an external, meddling force which must return to a cold culture. Since the 1980s, however, it has faced increased scrutiny by biologists and shown wanting: specifically, in (Doolittle 1981), (Dawkins 1982), (Gould 1997), (Volk 2002), and (Tyrrell 2013). Feedback, which Gaia relies upon to explain this notion of self-regulation, has not been materially found; in fact, there are many cases where life destabilizes.

Primitivism implicitly, and deep ecology explicitly, relies on the overpopulation thesis, which is false¹ (see (St-Onge 2014) and (Gimenez 1973)), but politically useful to push a Malthusian population control on the “rapidly reproducing” poor, creating eugenics policies that survive to this day and generally target the poor for forced sterilisation but also encouraging the powerful to turn a blind eye to famine and genocide. Overpopulation, as a myth, obscures overproduction and artificial scarcity, such as the massive food waste (and waste of phosphorus and arable land) implicit in the capitalist agricultural system. It assumes all human beings have similar consumption habits to the First World middle-class, which is again limited spatially, temporally, and based on one’s relationship to capital (birth rates are highest in areas where there are fewest resources)—and indeed, most waste is not driven by consumption as the overpopulation narrative alleges; it is created in production using wasteful but profitable technologies. The so-called horrors of overpopulation frequently cited are really failures of supplying urban infrastructure in the hyper-urbanized areas of the Global South. What this demands is a more careful use of resources, not eugenics.

Indeed, even in (Marx 1867, pp. 783–5, 786, 788) one sees a refutation of Malthusian theories:

The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every particular historical mode of production has its own special laws of population, which are historically valid within that particular sphere. An abstract law of population exists only for plants and animals, and even then only in the absence of any historical intervention by man.

But if a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population also becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interests of capital’s own changing valorization requirements.

With accumulation, and the development of the productivity of labour that accompanies it, capital’s power of sudden expansion also grows; it grows, not merely because the elasticity of the capital already functioning increases, not merely because the absolute wealth of society expands (and capital only forms an elastic part of this), not merely because credit, under every special stimulus, at once places an unusual part of this wealth at the disposal of production in the form of additional capital; it grows also because the technical conditions of the production process – machinery, means of transport, etc. – themselves now make possible a very rapid transformation of masses of sur-

¹Thanks to edward for the sources for this

plus product into additional means of production. The mass of social wealth, overflowing with the advance of accumulation and capable of being transformed into additional capital, thrusts itself frantically into old branches of production, whose market suddenly expands, or into newly formed branches, such as railways, etc., which now become necessary as a result of the further development of the old branches. In all such cases, there must be the possibility of suddenly throwing great masses of men into the decisive areas without doing any damage to the scale of production in other spheres. The surplus population supplies these masses. The path characteristically described by modern industry, which takes the form of a decennial cycle (interrupted by smaller oscillations) of periods of average activity, production at high pressure, crisis, and stagnation, depends on the constant formation, the greater or less absorption, and the re-formation of the industrial reserve army or surplus population. In their turn, the varying phases of the industrial cycle recruit the surplus population, and become one of the most energetic agencies for its reproduction.

and:

Modern industry's whole form of motion therefore depends on the constant transformation of a part of the working population into unemployed or semi-employed 'hands'. The superficiality of political economy shows itself in the fact that it views the expansion and contraction of credit as the cause of the periodic alternations in the industrial cycle, whereas it is a mere symptom of them. Just as the heavenly bodies always repeat a certain movement, once they have been flung into it, so also does social production, once it has been flung into this movement of alternate expansion and contraction. Effects become causes in their turn, and the various vicissitudes of the whole process, which always reproduces its own conditions, take on the form of periodicity. When this periodicity has once become consolidated, even political economy sees that the production of a relative surplus population – i.e. a population surplus in relation to capital's average requirements for valorization – is a necessary condition for modern industry.

and:

Capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labour-power which the natural increase of population yields; It requires for its unrestricted activity an industrial reserve army which is independent of these natural limits.

§5.2 Whither Praxis? Lifestylism, School Shooters, or Genocide Advocacy

At first, one might, following (Bookchin 1995), simply write off primitivism as mere *lifestyle anarchism* considering its inability to provide a realistic praxis. The support among primitivists for Ted Kaczynski (by John Zerzan and by CrimethInc. among others) as well as Adam Lanza's flirtation with primitivism in an attempt to pre-emptively justify the Sandy Hook shooting should give us pause.

A *realistic* primitivist praxis, one which wishes to “free” all of humanity, would by necessity require the destruction of the capacity to re-develop civilization, which, as mentioned before, would require “a species-wide lobotomy”: the primitivist solution, if it is to go beyond lifestylism, must take the following form: “kill 99% of the population, lobotomise the rest”. Again, this is because “the amassed wealth, capital, and knowledge exists in the material world at that point”—and also because, as stated in (Land 1994), “Hot cultures tend to social dissolution. They are innovative and adaptive. They always trash and recycle cold cultures. Primitivist models have no subversive use.”. In addition, holding a rejection of so-called “anthropocentrism” (which only makes sense because they identify “human interests” with the economic interest of the capitalist class) as the supposed first principle, especially with the implicit acceptance of the overpopulation thesis, necessarily leads to misanthropy as the real first principle, and to eugenics as praxis. These two elements combined show that, although most overtly in deep-ecology based primitivist strands (which, compared to primitivist strands that attempt to avoid deep ecology, rely heavily on the latter element), a support for genocide (and for smaller scale atrocities, such as school shootings) is inseparable from primitivism as a whole.

In some respect, then, Kaczynski is correct: primitivists, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance, project their own progressive values upon their project which is in fact incompatible with said values. Contemporary primitivists have learned to disavow the implications of deep ecology as made evident in the late 1980s, yet it lurks within their project, due in part to the necessity of genocide in order for their project to reach fruition and due to an inability to replace the technology (most often medical) that supports trans people, disabled people, and chronically ill people; according to primitivists, said technology is alienation and so people who rely on them must make do somehow without them if humanity is to be freed from alienation. Indeed, it is no surprise that trans woman-exterminatory radical feminism and primitivism share kinship (indeed, we may say that there is very little room, if any, for primitivism to *not* be transphobic, despite the efforts of trans primitivists): not only is one of the founding texts of radical feminism, Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, an idealist piece of mystification much like primitivism as a whole, both rely on bio-essentialism and the naturalistic fallacy that “nature” and “culture” form a binary and “nature” is superior to “culture”.

Much of the reason why primitivism cannot avoid its genocidal tendencies is because it shares a central characteristic of fascism (despite its rejection of the technological death-cult which was so prominent in the elements of Italian and German fascism connected to the artistic and intellectual avant-garde), as described in (Benjamin 1930) and (Benjamin 1936): “behind every fascism there is a failed revolution” (1919 in Germany and Italy, 1968 for the primitivists)—fascism emerges from a revolutionary urge which, unable to make revolution (or having been recently defeated in a revolution) and lacking—or obscuring through mystification—class consciousness (primitivism explicitly rejects notions of class conflict in favor of theories of civilization/Leviathan imposing itself upon the masses; its idealism precludes a truly revolutionary standpoint) “lashes out” libidinally without threatening the status quo (and indeed, if it succeeds in becoming a mass movement, works to *protect* the status quo); for this to work, politics must be aestheticized. Primitivism is unlikely to become a mass movement, so it cannot be charged with working to *protect* the status quo, but the other criteria more-or-less fit. The influence of the Stirnerite post-left (for Stirner and Nietzsche were formative influences on the Conservative Revolutionaries:

Ernst and Friedrich Georg Jünger, Julius Evola, Carl Schmitt, and Oswald Spengler), the kinship with fascistic anti-trans feminists, and the explicitly genocidal deep ecologists are but more evidence of this underlying similarity, and explain why those strands in particular tend to converge more often on explicating the genocidal implications of primitivism.

Errata

My view on anarcho-primitivism and anti-civilization has not changed. However, I have become dissatisfied with some elements of this essay: for instance, my completely uncritical repetition of the typical colonial-anthropologist caricature of the Yanomamö. This account was a racist one, and indeed mirrors Pierre Clastres' racist anthropology which is at the base of much recent primitivist writing. For this I apologize, and I will, in the future, be more careful and more critical, including of myself.

Besides that, I must also mention that I did not address many elements of anarcho-primitivism/anti-civilization, such as the theoretical debt it frequently owes to Pierre Clastres and to Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux*. I did not address in enough depth climate change millennialism, nor did I provide a better approach to it, such as John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology*, nor even did I provide a proposal for a way out. I neglected to issue certain critiques, such as one on the use of theory as an æsthetic, and anti-civilization theory as commodity-fetishism.

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